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GUILLAUME LEKEU

(1870-1894)

By O. G. SONNECK

Enfin, ce pauvre Guillaume Lekeu tempérament quasi génial, mais mort à vingt-quatre ans avant d'avoir pu se manifester d'une manière complète. (Vincent d'Indy in his chapter on the "artistic family" of "père Franck").

TO die at the age of twenty-four and to leave a permanent mark in the Book of Art, of itself bespeaks genius. That is precisely the sad but proud record of Guillaume Lekeu. His case is more tragic than that of Schubert or Pergolesi. They, too, died young but not before Nature permitted them to shower on us the fruit of ripened genius. Fate treated Lekeu more cruelly: his life-thread was cut before he could possibly refine all the crudities of youth in the crucible of a mature mind. It would be futile to deny this and no friend of Lekeu's art has yet failed to acknowledge that occasional "écriture inégale" in his music on which Henri Maubel in his "Préfaces pour des musiciens" dwells feelingly and understandingly. Yet, no friend of Lekeu's art—and my own efforts in his behalf first took concrete form about as long ago as 1905—need apologize for his public espousal of an artist admittedly immature, for Lekeu's immaturity is more acceptable by far than the maturity of those unfortunate artists who long outlive their over-ripe productions. If Guillaume Lekeu did not live long enough to earn the full title of genius and master, his are at least the credentials of one almost a genius and almost a master. They have been honored as such by more critics than any other artist of so premature a death, I believe, has ever inspired to encomia, not to mention exponents of his art among conductors and performers. If men like d'Indy, Closson, Maubel, Pujo, Séré, de Stoecklin, Destranges, Tissier, Gauthier-Villars, Dukas, Vallas, Lyr, Debussy, Hale did not disdain to lay wreaths of laurel on the tomb of Guillaume Lekeu, the humble music-lover, if thrilled by Lekeu's music like those men were, need not take seriously professional myopes whom

Lekeu's youth misleads into disrespectful remarks about his music.

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Claude Debussy, who had introduced Lekeu's "Unfinished Quartet for piano and strings" to a Parisian public on February 1, 1896, under the auspices of the *Société nationale*, (since 1871 so valiant a herald of new talent) in his contribution to Landormy's enquête on the present state of music in France (*Revue bleue*, 1904) wrote:

"César Franck is not French, he is a Belgian. Yes, there is a Belgian school. Next to Franck, Lekeu is one of its most remarkable representatives, this Lekeu, the only musician to my knowledge whom Beethoven really inspired."

The same year that Debussy made this startling statement, —to be more specific, on Nov. 16, 1904—the Hoffmann Quartet with Miss Alice Cummings introduced the "Unfinished Quartet" to Boston. It elicited from the critic of the *Boston Journal* the terse comment:

Everywhere it breathes genius and causes regret for the untimely death of its creator at 24.

This was as close a replica of the usual French comment of Lekeu's art as one could desire. Philip Hale, so brilliant and able a champion of modern French music in those and earlier years and ever since, of course, shared his colleague's opinion. He remarked in the *Boston Herald*:

Lekeu's voice was his own. His music is not like that of other men; he thought in his own way and his emotional eloquence in this quartet is genuine and convincing. . . Such music does not suffer when played after a noble work by Beethoven, but it makes a work like that of Dvořák's which followed unendurable.

In fact, if I am not very much mistaken, it was Philip Hale whose voice was first raised in America in behalf of Lekeu with that authority and power which compels lazy ears to listen attentively. At any rate, as early as the year 1900, when Lekeu was still practically unknown in America, Philip Hale in his and L. C. Elson's remarkably up-to-date new series of "Famous Composers and their works," included this striking critical estimate of Lekeu based on Ernest Closson's biographical sketch in "*Le Guide Musical*," 1895:

Lekeu was distinctively of the young French school, and his music shows all the good qualities and all the faults of that school: independence of form, predominance of the idea, a gift of perhaps too refined tone color, fastidiousness in style, excessive boldness in harmony. But it should not be forgotten that the young composer was intoxicated with his freedom from pedagogism and fixed and fired with a ferocious hate of all applauded commonplaces and vulgarity. Chiefly remarkable in his writing are inexhaustible richness of invention, the very melodic character of his inspiration, and the fiery spontaneity and the peculiar intensity of individual feeling. His musical sentiment is characterized by tenderness, compassion and a premonition of death.

Still more critically concentrated, I think, is the opinion of Marcel Orban, who edited a few of Lekeu's letters for the *Courrier musical* in 1910:

if sometimes the tumultuous current of his ideas interferes with the neatness of the total ensemble, an extremely rare, a unique quality—the power to move—makes us forget imperfections which result from a magnificent surabundance of ideas and silences criticism.

Curiously enough, while Mr. Hale in 1904 so emphatically favored Lekeu's unfinished Quartet, the Boston correspondent of the German musical magazine "*Die Musik*," himself a German, was utterly nonplussed. So were most of the German critics when Stavenhagen and Berber played Lekeu's Violin Sonata about that time at Munich, Berlin, Leipzig. "Unclear," "vague," "amateurish," "sterile," these were some of the unfriendly epithets hurled at the sonata in addition to "immature." In good faith, of course, and without any *intentional* chauvinism. However, it would lead entirely too far, though it would be easy, to account for this strange exhibition of a misapplied nationalism which appraises the intrinsic value of a foreign work of art according to the presence or absence of the influence of one's own national art thereon and is responsible for the frequent undervaluation of César Franck in Germany just as much as for that of Johannes Brahms in France.

Other quotations might have been adduced as testimonials to Lekeu's talent or genius, whatever term one prefers; the above owe their selection in part to special reasons. They embody both a misconception and a contradiction which, unchallenged, might confuse the student of Lekeu and obscure the appreciation of his racial individuality. The contradiction lies in this that Philip Hale (and others) unreservedly group him with "the young French school" whereas Debussy, (seconded by Jean Huré and other French nationalists) emphatically considers him a Belgian, not a Frenchman, and sees in him one of the most

remarkable representatives of the Belgian School, next to César Franck. Debussy's sharp distinction will startle those whom wisdom or convenience has led to affix the same national label to Franck, Lekeu, d'Indy, Chausson, Debussy, Ravel, *e tutti quanti*. It will not startle those whose ears never quite could accept the doctrine that Franck's music sounds wholly Latin, much less wholly French. Now Debussy, whom no one will accuse of underestimating Franck's greatness as composer as he did that of Wagner, though he really owes very much more to Wagner than to Franck, cannot very well be accused of establishing a difference between tweedledum and tweedledee, inasmuch as the Belgians themselves will have none of the customary critical melting-pot and take a similar separatist view. The very fact that Lekeu after the disappointing study of certain cantatas by Paul Gilson and Edgar Tinel could exclaim in one of his letters: "Is a Belgian school of composers merely an illusion and a snare?" proves that the Belgians take the existence of a distinctively Belgian school for granted. Now Lekeu confesses his inability quite to follow Tinel because the text of his cantata is in Flemish, of which language he understands not a word! Wherewith the genealogists of music face the discomfiting fact that the Belgian nation is a combination but not an amalgamation of two racial groups, different in language, temperament and consequently in art. Paradoxical as it may appear: if there is *one* Belgian school of music, there must of racial necessity be *two*. The whole matter has been summed up very neatly for those who are at all capable of reforming their opinions, by Mr. René Lyr in his chapter on Belgian music in Lavignac's remarkable "Encyclopédie de la musique du Conservatoire" (1914). *Without the contributions of our musicians surely French music would not be what it is*, he avers (quite correctly) and on this claim in behalf of Belgian music in general he superimposes the clear-cut distinction between a Flemish-Belgian school (Germanic) and a Walloon-Belgian school (Gallic-Latin), the one differing essentially from the modern French, the other from the modern German. Thus he presents Blockx and Benoit as Belgian composers of Flemish characteristics, César Franck and Lekeu as Belgian composers of Walloon characteristics. (In Franck's case, moreover, he records a German substratum, by reason of descent. Hence, a recent American program annotator was wiser than his smiling readers suspected when he compounded César Franck into "a French composer, Belgian by birth, but of German stock"). Only if one takes into due account this belief and pride of Belgians in a dual Belgian

school, can one fully comprehend the significance of the comment of Lekeu's biographer Tissier on the impression created by his premature death: "the blow was crushingly cruel to all, for in Lekeu the qualities of heart and character reached up to his genius as an artist." The personality of their young friend endeared him to men like Ysaye, Crickboom, Voncken, Kéfer, but their jubilation over every new sign of progress in his art, their love and admiration for him and their public espousal of his works struck a deeper source than his sympathetic qualities of heart and character: they had seen in Guillaume Lekeu a young compatriot so richly endowed with promise that their fervent hope for an eventual successor to César Franck had come to be centered in him,

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Premonition of death was at one time supposed to have inspired Brahms' "Vier ernste Gesänge" as well as Tschaikowsky's "Symphonie pathétique." It did in neither case and it did not in the case of Lekeu's "Unfinished Quartet for piano and strings." Mr. Hale simply voices a current tradition which Alexandre Tissier in his authoritative pamphlet on Guillaume Lekeu (Verriers, 1906) took pains to shatter by declaring that "contrary to what often has been said, Lekeu never ceased to be of a gay, jolly, exuberant, enthusiastic disposition and never at any time had a premonition of his premature death." Indeed such a premonition of death would have been a rather protracted affair, of several years' standing, since the same element of sombreness, if not of piercing lament, pervades all of Lekeu's works and not only his "Unfinished Quartet."¹ Apparently Lekeu's frequent and characteristic "wail" was a matter of temperament with him. For that reason he might have developed into a kind of Leopardi of musical art without in the slightest letting this very same "wail" disturb or perturb his daily life as a mere human being. And if Tissier's statement is not accepted as binding, then we possess in its support a long series of letters written by Lekeu to his parents and Louis Kéfer during the years 1889-1893 and published with a prefatory note by Paul de Stoecklin in the "Courrier Musical" of 1906.

There is in these letters not the slightest trace of an abnormally gloomy disposition or view of life, much less of a premonition

¹Lekeu's art reminds me of Dante's lines in the "Purgatory": A place there is below not sad with torments, But darkness only, where the lamentations Have not the sound of wailing, but of sighs.

of death. They are the letters of a "serious young gentleman" of extraordinary mental equipment who enjoyed life, held his chosen art sacred and sought to live up to his motto "Everybody works and that is decidedly the only way to arrive at happiness." I quite agree with Marcel Orban, who ridicules the *presentiment of death* idea which people love to ascribe to great men and says that Lekeu was thinking of life only, with the gaiety and exuberance of his age, with enthusiasm, with an ardent desire for instruction and the creation of beautiful things. His mental evolution was simply more rapid than in ordinary mortals and that accounts for a seriousness of mind not often met with in artists so young. It accounts also, I think, for that remarkable self-critical attitude assumed by Lekeu toward his works as soon as the first flush of satisfaction with a piece of work well done had passed. Pride in his own accomplishment is noticeable, of course, but it seldom partook of that youthful naïve, overweening self-esteem on which most of us have reason to look back with amusement and which most of us coupled with (in retrospect) amusing annihilation of composers against whom we conceived for this or that reason an esthetic grudge. Lekeu had his antipathies, too,—for example he took an impulsive dislike to Magnard, sneered at the "nullities" of Ambroise Thomas, expressed disgust with Bruneau after he had succumbed to the pernicious influence of Zola, waxed sarcastic over the preferment of Massenet and his "Esclarmonde" to César Franck, felt his heart "frozen and bleeding" over such a situation which retarded the publication of Franck's scores and elicited from the great master at sixty this pathetic excuse for his publishers "If I perchance should become celebrated"—but his remarks on younger contemporary composers reveal a decided aptitude for benevolent critical neutrality and a judgment so well-balanced and clairvoyant as if it had been written to-day and not more than twenty years ago. But more important for the present purpose than Lekeu's characterization of certain works by d'Indy, Fauré, Charpentier, Chausson, Bordes and others is his artistic *credo* on the one hand and his conception of the essence of music on the other, since they open for us the road to a readier appreciation and easier grasp of Lekeu's art and aims. The pertinent observations to be culled from his letters to Louis Kéfer will speak for themselves, I think, without further comment on my part:

To Louis Kéfer; Dec. 16, 1889.

[César Franck's *Rédemption*] This is absolutely a colossal master-work. . . It is for me (Wagner's works always aside, it goes without

saying) the work of purest genius in sacred music since the D minor mass of the *God* Beethoven. . .

[When reading a trio by Kéfer] I have observed there again a psychological phenomenon which I often felt: revery proceeding from mild and serene joy leads to melancholy and thence irresistibly to the idea of God.

To Louis Kéfer, January 18, 1890.

. . . Later I may be able to answer your recent question: *What does Franck think of program music?* I have not yet discussed this matter with him; yet, on the basis of his habitual attitude, I consider myself safe in telling you that his opinion of this problem (at bottom easier than it looks) coincides with that of Beethoven. . . *Mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Tonmalerei* . . .

To Louis Kéfer, February 1, 1890.

I have asked Franck at last for his opinion on program music and here is his answer:

Whether music be descriptive, that is, busies itself with awakening the idea of something material, or whether music confines itself simply to a translation of a purely internal and exclusively psychological state of mind, matters not! It is merely necessary that a work be *musical* and above everything else *emotional*.

I do not know what you think of this opinion, which I consider reasonable enough; but to be perfectly candid, I do not believe that master Franck has weighed this problem often or securely, a problem which to my way of thinking led Berlioz astray, though its solution presents no forbidding difficulties.

However, I should always prefer the last page of the *Quintet*, the first *Trio*, the *Symphony*, the *Quatuor* of Franck to his *Djinns*, notwithstanding the fact that the expressiveness of that piece, within its limits, is wonderfully musical.

To his mother, March 1, 1890.

[On hearing "le 15^e quatuor du Dieu" Beethoven (op. 132) on which he subsequently wrote a brief expository essay, reprinted in the *Courrier Musical*, 1906] I am still trembling with the fever produced in me by that work; my impression certainly was the same as that of a blind man cured of cataract by a skillful operation.

To his musical deities Beethoven, Wagner, Franck here revealed, we must not fail to add Bach, an hour with whose "Well-tempered clavichord," for instance, he did not hesitate at Bayreuth to prefer to a reception at "Wahnfried"!

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Guillaume Lekeu was born at Heusy near Verviers on January 20, 1870. His parents moved to Poitiers (France) in 1879. There he entered the Lycée. Always one of the first of his class, he developed an aptitude for scientific knowledge so pronounced and

an interest in literature ancient and modern and the plastic arts so keen that he could not fail to impress his friends with his remarkable intellectual endowment. He graduated in 1888, entered the university at Paris and in due course took his bachelor's degree in philosophy before switching entirely to music as a profession.

We have Tissier's testimony that Lekeu's musical talent hardly revealed itself before his fourteenth year. He played a little violin and amused himself with the banalities of the day—when some pieces of Beethoven accompanied by a friend gave the first real impetus to his musical evolution. This was in 1885. On the strength of a few pianoforte and solfeggio lessons he then spent four years in assiduous study of Beethoven, Bach, Wagner, particularly of Beethoven, whose quartets he is said to have carried with him constantly. At Paris he had the good fortune to be thrown together with the many intellectual notables who gathered at Stephane Mallarmé's receptions. Equally stimulating was his friendship with Gabriel Séailles and Téodor de Wyzewa. It was the latter who dissuaded Lekeu from entering the Paris Conservatoire and induced him to begin his professional musical studies under Gaston Vallin, a former *prix de Rome*.

When Lekeu finished his harmony course under Vallin in less than three months, his friends bethought themselves of César Franck as the only master capable of controlling effectively Lekeu's incredibly rapid development. They effected an introduction through the good offices of M. Read, a mutual friend. At first Franck is said to have demurred, but from the moment that he accepted Lekeu as pupil he appears to have taken a fatherly interest in his musical welfare. Tissier and with him de Stoecklin claim that Lekeu had only about twenty lessons from Franck at the rate of two lessons a week. I doubt that even a César Franck could have imparted to so talented a pupil the mysteries of the most complicated types of counterpoint in twenty lessons. Lekeu's letters prove that to be a legend, for he began his studies under Franck sometime in 1889 (probably in early fall) and continued them until a very few days before Franck's death on Nov. 8, 1890. His progress, as under Vallin, was exceedingly rapid, and Franck apparently did not believe in applying the professional speed-limit. Lekeu in his letters to Louis Kéfer, the director of the conservatory at Verviers, has given us a vivid description of Franck's method. He taught him counterpoint orally without the aid of a text-book for the simple reason that he considered all text-books deplorable.

Basing the counterpoint studies principally on themes of sacred music such as the *Stabat Mater*, or the *Dies irae* he demanded that the contrapuntal embroidery

1. sound well (*i. e.* be musical)
2. above all else be expressive.

He believed that only in this way could the studies be infused with *life* and that otherwise they would be mere documents of extreme dryness. His principal aim (as throughout his career as teacher) was to stimulate the productive imagination of the pupil, first by guiding him into every nook of the workshop of a Bach or Beethoven and secondly by urging him on to unconventional musical utterance of his own. "That marches as on wheels," he would exclaim and would encourage Lekeu to write from lesson to lesson as much as he possibly could, with the result that three or four days later the fascinated pupil would submit ten or twelve pages of music for examination by a master than whom there was no greater teacher in all Europe! Franck wished to reach the study of fugue as rapidly as possible, so that it might run parallel to a study of counterpoint in its more complicated aspects. And Lekeu perceived the *rationale* of his procedure as early as Nov. 19, 1889, when he wrote to Kéfer:

I have finished my studies in three-part counterpoint. . . This kind of thing is not exactly amusing, but I feel that it gives to my musical pen an incredible fluency and I attend to it seriously.

And as Lekeu descended deeper and deeper into the intricacies of counterpoint the more affectionate the relations between the two grew, the master spending with open hand in valuable advice from the treasure-house of his experience as a composer, the pupil seeking it with open heart and reverential respect for his teacher's genius. Then César Franck died in November, 1890. We know from Lekeu's letter to Kéfer on April 15, 1891, how completely Franck's death stunned him:

In December [sic!] the death of my "cher Maître." When at the beginning of the new year, I saw myself freed from my extravagant occupation, [he had substituted in fall of 1890 as a teacher of Greek], when I could set myself to work again, I succeeded only in writing horrors without name, which I have grouped under the title of a *Trio* for piano, violin and violoncello.

I was completely bewildered; I passed four or five days a week smoking and watching the implacable rain pour down and telling myself how wise it would be to jump out of the window. But, since verily there are other things to do than to watch the down-pour, I forced myself,

best as I knew how, to do regular work. I plunged back into counter-point, double chorus and fugue and that sort of thing now marches *cahin-caha*. . .

Also, Vincent d'Indy, whose acquaintance I was fortunate enough to make, urges me in the friendliest spirit to work a lot. At every meeting he asks me if I have something new to show him. Thus I do not despair of being seized again by that fever for work which held me captive all last year. . .

It was indeed fortunate for Lekeu (and for us) that Vincent d'Indy, artistically *père* Franck's greatest son, stepped into the breach to act, as it were, as step-father to the orphan and as the pilot without whom perhaps, after all, Lekeu would have drifted on the rocks. Needless to say, Lekeu fully appreciated at their true value the eminent qualities of Vincent d'Indy as a teacher of composition. And when the time had come to put his talents and his technique to an actual concrete test, he followed Vincent d'Indy's advice to compete, notwithstanding his extreme youth, for the Belgian Rome prize in 1891, though it prevented him, very much to his regret, from journeying to Bayreuth. Victor in the preliminary test for admission (counter-point and fugue) his cantata received but the second-second prize. Utterly disgusted with the verdict of the jury, Lekeu forthwith renounced all ambition for further trial of strength in similar competitions, without, however, decrying the benefit of self-assurance to be derived from such contests. The next two years and a half were devoted to work incessant and fruitful with no biographical incidents worth recording here, except perhaps his trip to Aix-la-Chapelle in October, 1892, to hear Schumann's *Paradies and Peri*. "A sublime work of incomparable poetry" as he calls it in a letter of October 28, 1892, from Heusy to his mother, which contains this observation:

But what an astonishing thing the German public is! While fully appreciating and loving this or that interpreter, it does not tender them a personal ovation; all applause is delayed until after the last note of the work and then is intended for everybody, for choristers, orchestra, conductor, soloists, but above all for the memory of Robert Schumann. From the start it is not a question of the singer, but of the work and its beauty. Just the reverse of the French and Belgian practice. It explains in good measure the depth of thought in German musical works; the composer knows that he will always have a "listening" audience. What perpetual encouragement! To know that one will be judged on the merit of one's case!

In the fall of 1893, just when he began to enjoy full control of his powers and shortly after the first performance of his *Fantasie symphonique* on two folk-songs of Anjou at Verviers under his

own direction, he showed the initial signs of his lingering illness, contracted, it was diagnosed, from contaminated sherbet. Surrounded by his family Guillaume Lekeu died of typhoid fever on January 21, 1894, at Angers. On April 29 his friends organized a concert in honor of his memory so that the public might share their conviction of the great loss sustained by the world of music. The concert took place at Paris, at the Salle d'Harcourt, under the direction of Vincent d'Indy and with the coöperation of Mme. Deschamps-Jehin, Eugène Ysaye and A. Pierret. The program consisted of Lekeu's song "Sur une tombe," a scene from his ill-starred cantata "Andromède," his Violin sonata and his *Fantaisie symphonique* just mentioned.

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Lekeu's best known works found their way into the concert-hall rapidly, but only gradually to the printing-press after Vincent d'Indy had sifted the manuscripts and prepared them for publication. Presumably that explains the surprise expressed by some critics at the light *baggage* left by the young composer. This impression was faulty. A glance into the list of his works printed by his principal publisher, E. Baudoux & Cie. (now Rouart, Lerolle & Cie.) of Paris on the cover of Lekeu's Violin Sonata or into the bibliography appended by Octave Séré to his chapter on Lekeu in his valuable book on "Musiciens français d'aujourd'hui" (1911) leads to a totally different conclusion. Here it is with a few added or corrected dates:

Pianoforte: Tempo di Mazurka (comp. about 1887, Poitiers, Alb. Alliaume).

Trois pièces: 1. Chansonette sans paroles. 2. Valse oublié. 3. Danse joyeuse (comp. 1891; Liège, veuve L. Muraille, 189-).

Sonata (comp. April, 1891; Baudoux, 1900)

Songs: La fenêtre de la maison paternelle (A. de Lamartine; comp. 1887. Unpublished).

Chanson de Mai (comp. 1891; Jean Lekeu; Baudoux, 1900).

Trois poèmes (Guillaume Lekeu): 1. Sur une tombe. 2. Rondo. 3. Nocturne (comp. 1892; Baudoux, 1894. The "Nocturne" exists also with string orchestra accompaniment by Lekeu himself).

Mélodie—L'ombre plus dense (G. Lekeu; comp. 1893. Liège, Veuve L. Muraille).

Les Pavots (A. de Lamartine; Rouart-Lerolle, 1909).

Chamber music: Adagio pour deux violons et piano (1888; unpublished).

Sonate pour piano et violon (comp. 1892; Baudoux, 1894 or 1895;¹ a transcription for piano and violoncello by Ronchini published by Rouart, Lerolle et Cie, 1912).

Trio pour piano, violon et violoncelle (1891; Rouart-Lerolle, 1908).

Sonate pour piano et violoncelle (unfinished; prepared by V. d'Indy for publication by Rouart-Lerolle, 1910, but apparently not yet published).

Quatuor pour piano, violon, alto et violoncelle (comp. 1893, unfinished; prepared by V. d'Indy for publication by Baudoux, 1896).

Orchestra: Première étude symphonique: *Chant de triomphale délivrance* (1889); Rouart-Lerolle, 190-; score *en location*.

Deuxième étude symphonique: 1. *Sur Hamlet* (unpublished.) 2. *Sur le second Faust* (Goethe; comp. 1890; Rouart-Lerolle, 190-; score *en location*).

Adagio pour quatuor d'orchestre, op. 3, (comp. 1891?; Rouart-Lerolle, 1908).

Poème pour violon et orchestre, (unfinished and unpublished).

Epithalame pour quintette à cordes, trois trombones et orgue (about 1891; unpublished).

Introduction et Adagio pour orchestre d'harmonie avec tuba solo obligé (1891; unpublished).

Fantaisie symphonique sur deux airs populaires anjevins (comp. 1891-1892, Rouart-Lerolle, 1909; also 4 hd. arr. publ.).

Operas and choral works: Barberine (A. de Musset; 1889; sketches; unpublished).

Les Burgraves (V. Hugo; fragments; unpublished).

Chant lyrique pour chœur et orchestre (1891; unpublished).

Andromède, poème lyrique et symphonique pour soli, chœurs et orchestre (Jules Sauvenière; comp. 1891; vocal score, Liège, veuve L. Muraille).

Baudoux's list is even more extensive than this as regards unpublished songs, pianoforte and chamber-music; it reaches the formidable total of about sixty compositions finished or unfinished or existing merely in form of sketches. And all this in less than seven years; and his weighty works in barely four and a half! What renders this record of industry still more amazing is the fact that sickness and other circumstances would force upon Lekeu a cessation or retardation of work for weeks and even months at a time, or when during the last three months of 1890, he substituted for a friend as teacher of Greek, Latin, etc. Furthermore it appears from his letters that he was not or at least did not consider himself a rapid worker. An amusing illustration of this fact he has recorded for us in a letter to Kéfer, June 15, 1891. Commenting

¹Séré gives 1899, but that is impossible, since E. Closson in the *Guide Musical*, April 12, 1895, mentions among the works so far published by Baudoux Lekeu's Violin Sonata, with allegorical title-page figure by Carlos Schwabe, "à la mémoire de notre Guillaume."

on his diffidence to enter the *prix de Rome* contest because of the short time (three days) allotted to the candidates for the fugue in four parts and chorus with orchestra in the preliminary test he writes:

I have never been able to write a fugue in less than six days. As for the chorus with orchestra I have tried to compose one in as short a time as possible, with the result that it took me eight days.

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Brief as was Guillaume Lekeu's career and restricted the number of his works available for performance, his position in the history of modern music—music of *yesterday* if confronted with Schönberg or Scriabin, but modern nevertheless—is prominent enough to warrant as comprehensive a presentation of biographical data as is possible or as space will permit. For that purpose Lekeu's letters published by Mr. de Stoecklin in the "Courrier musical" (1906) and repeatedly quoted in the preceding pages, are biographical documents of prime importance. So far as I know these letters have not been accessible heretofore in English and to students and admirers of Lekeu the translated extracts forming the major part of this essay will therefore, I hope, be welcome, grouped somewhat differently from the original publication in order to comply with chronology as much as is possible. They afford a clear view not only of Lekeu's character and of biographical episodes, but they disclose the genesis of some of his best and most ambitious works whether actually completed or not. Mr. de Stoecklin published the letters with numerous elisions. This perhaps accounts for the absence of reference or for the meagreness of reference to certain works, as for instance the Violoncello sonata, the Pianoforte sonata, the *Fantasie symphonique* on two folk-songs of Anjou. It is more than probable that these gaps would be filled by a publication of Lekeu's other correspondence not yet accessible in print. One would wish to know more about the genesis of these works, as also of the *Chant lyrique* for chorus and orchestra, (the score has been permuted to rest unpublished in the archives of the Société royale d'Émulation of Verviers after the first—and last—performance of the work at a concert of this society on December 3, 1891, had met with an "enormous success" according to Marcel Orban) or of the *Concerto for tuba and orchestra*. This odd concerto, according to the same authority, has remained absolutely unknown to the public, though it contains "wonderful things." To make matters

worse a certain Mr. Faniel, for whom it was composed, claims to have lost the precious manuscript.

That the letters do not mention Lekeu's pianoforte pieces need not be regretted: few critics would hesitate to throw them out of court. Divisions of opinion about Lekeu's songs is more probable, yet again few critics would care to go as far as Des-tranges and Closson in their praise. My own estimate is this: Lekeu, like Beethoven, does not appear always to have been quite at ease when writing for the voice. I doubt that he would have become a great master of the *Lied*. For instance, his "Chanson de Mai" (June 23, 1891) to words by his brother Jean is not very valuable; a certain youthful swing and tenderness cannot be denied to this spring-song, but it is not original and its profile is marred by the excessive employment of pot-boiler chords of the ninth. The simple, nocturnesque "Mélodie" to Lekeu's own words stands higher. If the poet perhaps was inspired in his apostrophe to "this night of December" by memories of Poe's "Ulalume" the musician vividly, at least in the middle-section, recalls Beethoven. On the title-page this song is called "Oeuvre posthume 1893" whereas Lekeu's most important songs, the cycle of his own "Poèmes: Sur une tombe—Rondo—Nocturne," are dated 1892. (They were actually finished in December of that year. Without these dates every one would claim for these songs a wide step forward!) Famous as these songs are said to have become in France and Belgium, they do not impress me as deeply as does Lekeu's chamber music, mainly because they are not essentially vocal in style. The voice part is not treated badly, on the contrary, but it is not independent enough from the piano part. Indeed, the songs almost gain if arranged as pieces for the piano with Lekeu's own poems as mottos instead of the lines by Lamartine, Verlaine, Hugo that are prefixed as such. When the voice does not travel unisono with the piano, the separation follows declamatory more than stilistic reasons.

Apart from such more or less technical objections, the *Poèmes* in all fairness demand serious interest and respect. They strive toward that freedom of musical speech which is so characteristic of latter-day songs and which will conjure the censure of incoherence the moment the voice-part is severed and studied away from its twin, the piano-part. Though the "Rondo" is full of esprit, almost catchy, "Sur une tombe" and the "Nocturne" lent themselves best to Lekeu's introspective, brooding manner, a conclusion verified from the fact that the young composer took pains to provide his favorite, the "Nocturne," also with an

accompaniment transcribed for orchestra, which is said to be impressively beautiful. The three songs are very difficult of interpretation, and this difficulty will always stand between them, the singer and the public. But thoughtfully interpreted they must conquer every sensitive connoisseur of song. Yet he would find that the impression created does not result wholly from the music: Lekeu, the poet, deserves his share of approval, since his exquisitely impressionistic blank verses lead the composer without effort to interesting rhythmical experiments and to melodic curves of extraordinary breadth. As a specimen of Lekeu's poetic gifts, his "Nocturne" (a landscape seen with the eyes of the soul, as it has been called) may follow here:

Des prés lointains d'azur sombre où
fleurissent les étoiles, descend, lente et
précieuse, la caresse d'un long voile
d'argent pâli dans le velours de l'ombre.

Aux branches des bouleaux, des
sorbiers et des pins, la tenture suspend
ses long plis de mystère où dort le
sommeil des chemins et l'oublieuse
paix de rêve et de la terre.

L'air frais et pur, dans les feuilles,
Laisse mourir un lent soupir
Si doux qu'il semble le désir
Des défunctes vierges aimées
Cherchant l'invisible joyau
Que va berçant près du ruisseau
La chanson murmurante et douce
De l'onde rieuse en la mousse. . .
La lune resplendit comme une agraffe
d'or! et parfumant la plaine heu-
reuse, la bruyère s'endort dans l'om-
bre lumineuse.

From distant meadows of sombre
blue, where the stars flower, descends
slowly and exquisitely the caress of a
long silvery veil, pale in velvet shadows.

From the branches of birches, sorbs,
and pines the drapery suspends its
long mysterious folds where rest in
slumber the paths and the forgetful
peace of dreams and of the earth.

The fresh and pure air lets die in
the leaves a slow sigh so sweet that it
resembles the desires of maidens once
loved, now dead, but still in search of
the invisible jewel that lulls asleep
in the moss near the rivulet the mur-
muring, lovely song of its smiling
ripples.

The moon is resplendent like a golden
locket! and wafting delicious odors
through the happy plains. All noise
is lulled asleep in the illumined shadows.

In July and August, 1889, Lekeu, in company with his friends de Wyzewa and Guéry, made a musical pilgrimage to Germany, visiting Munich, Frankfort, Nuremberg and especially Bayreuth. Even to-day his letters home make good Wagnerian reading and will release memories of similar Wagnerian impressions in those of us who in those days, too, had their first full taste of the magician of Bayreuth. For instance, on August 1 he wrote from Munich:

The day before yesterday I saw at the Munich opera an immense master-piece: The Flying Dutchman of Wagner. Simply prodigious! And the performance! Yes, Germany is a country in every way more than extraordinary. . . It is a powerful and admirable work proceeding without intermission from *Fidelio*. What will it be at Bayreuth?

and on Aug. 12 from Bayreuth after having heard *Tristan*, the *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*:

. . . Wagner can absolutely not be understood from the piano; to hear or rather to see one of his dramas is to enter an entirely new world of which until now I had no conception. One cries almost all the time: *Parsifal* has made me passionately religious and I feel a smothering longing to go to Mass (for that is the only thing resembling Wagner's super-human revery). And to think that I am to hear again *Tristan* and after that the *Meistersinger*.

From these quotations one might infer that Lekeu did not begin to sketch his opera "Barberine" until after he had come under the spell of Bayreuth. Yet his letter to Kéfer of November 19, 1889, undermines this inference:

My humble felicitations [on the success of Kéfer's symphony] may appeal to you like mustard after supper and yet, my dear Sir, I beg of you to accept them and to believe in their sincerity.

My uncle recently informed me of the kind interest with which you spoke of me. I hardly know how to thank you for this new sign of affection and I cannot find suitable words to thank you for your request of a musical work through my uncle. I should very much like to be at your service, but I really cannot as yet. Please listen instead, my dear Sir, to this recital of events.

. . . Since May I am working on a scenic study in three characters (I omit three others, as they are of no importance for the sense of the work): a study after Alfred de Musset's charming comedy: *Barberine*. My score will have two acts; I hope to finish in one or two months (let us say by January 1) the first act. Though not completely. I sketch the music on three, four, five or even eight and ten staves, multiplying the instrumental indications, but the orchestral score has not been started even, very much less the arrangement for piano, the very thought of which makes my hair stand on edge. So you see that I have at least a year of work ahead of me, and serious work at that, before I shall reach the end of my little drama.

So far I need not complain about myself. Indeed I confess quite frankly to have realized my intentions fairly well. Without false illusions, however, about the value of this first work for the stage, since I feel only too well how the master of Bayreuth rests with all his formidable weight on my thoughts; after all I merely sought to follow him, to be straightforward and accurate in the declamation, expressive and musical in the instrumentation and furthermore scenic. Now to-day a friend of mine, an actor at the Odéon, assures me that Mme. Lardin, sister of de Musset, would never permit the performance of the work (if by some lucky chance that opportunity should arise) nor the performance of excerpts at a concert. It would seem that she rejects absolutely all the numerous requests for permission to adopt musically her brother's dramas and comedies. . . . At any rate, if an orchestra is willing, I can always at my expense and unhindered by Mme. Lardin, have the purely symphonic parts of my work played. But I find only two excerpts fit for concert performance and the first will lose much, I fear, away from

the stage: a fragment of the second scene of the first act and the prelude for the second.

My first act will have no prelude; I thought this best since the principal character does not appear until the second act.

The prelude, then, is reserved for this entry in the second act: it will depict the loveliness of Barberine, her goodness of heart, her love and her devotion to her husband. This is a fine program, to be sure, but. . . I have not yet written a note of it. Without doubt (since four fifths of the first act are finished) I may avail myself of several of the motives as a foundation for this symphonic piece.

Still, I shall require two or three other motives. Because useless for the first act, I have reserved them exclusively for the second; the business, then, remains of putting all these themes in order for a concise piece of orchestral music.

I propose to put my hand to this prelude the moment I see the end in sight of the second act. As soon as it is finished I shall show it to my master Franck and it will give me a real pleasure to send you the score. . . I have also an introduction to *La Coupe et les lèvres* in my head, but that is practically only in the state of a mere project. . .

To Kéfer, Paris, Dec. 16, 1889.

. . . Recently I wrote to you about my "future" scenic essay: *Barberine*. I have abandoned it. For this very *intime* drama I composed a Prelude. I showed it to Franck: it pleased him very much and he did not withhold his compliments (far from it!). Yet he advised me against writing for orchestra too soon. I shall follow his advice. Nevertheless the orchestration of this Prelude is entirely sketched; nothing remains to be done except to transcribe it in score. The same applies to a symphonic study in form of a *Chant de triomphale délivrance* which I finished about a month ago on four or five staves surcharged with instrumental indications. These two pieces and my fugue, there you have a list of my works since October. . .

The above reference to his "first symphonic study" called *Chant de triomphale délivrance* disposes of the assertion by Tissier, de Stoecklin (who edited the letters!) and others that the work was first performed under Kéfer in 1889, before Lekeu "had received a single lesson in composition." That is at best a doubtful compliment. We must not forget that in November Lekeu already had developed the habit of taking his oracle in counterpoint, César Franck, into his compositional confidence and certainly not without profit. As a matter of fact, the *Chant de triomphale délivrance* was not performed by Kéfer, to whom it is dedicated, at a concert of the Verviers conservatory until April 13, 1890. The history of this performance is sufficiently outlined for biographical purposes in the following three letters:

To Kéfer, Paris, January 18, 1890.

. . . You will receive with this mail a manuscript which without doubt will impress you as being unreasonably long. Excuse me, its

length and my boldness in dedicating to you my first work for orchestra. But I believed that this dedication was yours, of right because of all the kindness you have shown me and because of all the things that I have concocted so far it is the only one that satisfies me. I have worked on it since November. The last five or six pages of the score I attacked six or seven times. I finally saved only the version which appeared to me to be the most concise and precise. . .

Tell me frankly what you think of it, for I am very young and at twenty, one hardly ever has the good fortune to meet so devoted a friend as you: in other words, it would not pain me in the slightest, not even after the happy news from you, if I had to wait some time, even some years, before appearing in public. Above all I must ripen.

March, 1890, to his mother.

I have heard yesterday the first rehearsal of my *Etude symphonique*. On the whole, I was satisfied. It sounds well; it is an orchestra à la Beethoven and Kéfer has again told me, warmly pressing my hands, that the fugue is "prodigieusement charpentée." However, I shall make a few little changes, not melodic or harmonic, but orchestral. Yesterday's rehearsal took place under particularly disadvantageous conditions. For an hour and three quarters Kéfer had kept the musicians busy rehearsing his symphony; tired, they were about to leave the hall, when Kéfer called them back and requested them to try over a work by one of their compatriots. They went about it sawing and blowing as best they knew how, but the horns and trombones, not knowing the work at all, missed many entries. When they had finished they began to applaud and I had to rise, (I was seated hidden in a corner of the hall) and bow my acknowledgements right and left; after which I had to shake hands for five or six minutes. All that will make you laugh, and yesterday I felt like doing likewise. The main point, however, is: it is good music and feasible.

At the next concert a piece (Again!) by *Voss' éfant* will be performed. This little piece (which you will certainly hear) is a *bonne blague* invented by me and Massau [violoncellist, professor at the Conservatory of Verviers].

First a violin and violoncello take their place at their desks, all others remaining vacant. They wait a little while for the others, who do not appear, and then play a motive of "Crampignon" (first the violin, then the violoncello takes it up accompanied by the violin in imitative counterpoint).

While they are playing, an alto arrives, sits down and takes up the motive. And during all the succeeding entries (in a goose-march, as it were) of the string instruments, a little fugue is rolled off without interruption.

Then comes an oboe: he wants to take up the theme, but bizarre chords impose silence on him after two futile attempts. In the meantime a clarinet has entered and chants a melody, calm and interpretative of the pleasure one feels when making music with friends. This melody is treated in an adagio of five or six lines. Then the horn and bassoons take part in the sport; the volume of sound increases; finally the violins intone victoriously the chant of the clarinet and at the

same time the basses, doubled by the bassoon, take up the theme of *crampignon* which served as subject for the fugue. (Just like in the *Mastersingers*).

You see, my dear Mother, one can write *blagues* [hoaxes] in music as well as in literature. But I have tried to make this caprice amusing and yet very musical. I believe it will sound marvelously well. Almost all the successive entries are amusing and unexpected; especially a fortissimo entry of the double bass solo. . .

I have not been able to identify this reversed shadow of Haydn's "Abschieds-Symphonie" in Baudoux's list of Lekeu's works. Perhaps the score has disappeared. That would be regrettable, for an opportunity to hear Lekeu's whimsical piece ought to prove most entertaining on a suitable occasion. Indeed, just for the fun of it—and we need a little more fun in music—one might wish to see Lekeu's *blague* and Haydn's *blague* put in juxtaposition on a program.

Again it is a letter to Kéfer which acquaints us with the conception and genesis of one of Lekeu's "serious" and ambitious works, nothing less than a triptych, however incongruous. He writes from Paris, on May 22, 1890:

. . . I have undertaken *une grosse machine* in three parts for orchestra (and male chorus in the third). I shall tell you below of the subject and the plan. Here, first of all, my reasons for hoping to hear this work at an early date. M. Voncken [violinist, professor at the Verviers conservatory] has requested of me for the annual concert de l'Emulation a work for orchestra and chorus. Furthermore, recently I was introduced to M. Louis de Romain, who with Jules Bordier is in charge of the artistic enterprise of the concerts at Angers. This gentleman treated me charmingly and asked me to let him have in August, when he next visits Paris, the score of a symphonic piece. I have set myself the task of finishing for his purpose and by that date the first part of my *Poème*.

Here is the point of this heavy job: I should like to make a Musical Study after Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The first part has for a motto "*To die—to sleep;—To sleep! perchance to dream. . .*" You see that this is precisely Hamlet's character.

But this character, I feel neither old nor strong enough to adequately depict: that task requires a Beethoven! But at least I can attempt to illustrate musically some principal traits of the character: the thirst of death, the march of his mind toward this idea: seeing first in Death a deliverance and then fear of finding beyond the grave painful surprises; his hatred, thereupon, of all the rank evil which surrounds him (his counsellors, his mother, his step-father). Thus I am also led to reveal the honesty of this extraordinary soul, his profound love of the good, his eternal attachment to his father.—You see that this is not a small affair. Many things will still have to be considered and translated, for the complexity of this character (so astonishingly *one*, after all) is truly crushing.

Well! I have resolutely set myself to the business! Even before leaving for Verviers I was spending much thought on it.

I have finished the first part. Now I must prepare the entrance of the themes of hate and combine them symphonically with the motives of Invocation of Death.

The second part will have as epigraph: "*Das Ewig-weibliche zieht uns hinan*" (the last words of the second Faust): the consolation that Death will not perhaps procure and which the troubled soul asks of Love. But there again, complete deception; and the themes of grief return still more certain of their victory.

The third part will have as epigraph: "*O proud Death! What feast is toward in thine eternal cell That so many princes at a shot so bloodily has struck?*" This is the definitive triumph of Grief.—There is one thing against which I must guard myself: to want to narrate in music concrete facts (program music), for instance, the apparition of the ghost and other *bêtises*. Under no circumstances do I wish to attempt rewriting in music Shakespeare's drama. My desire is merely to essay a translation into music of some of my impressions gained from the frequent reading of *Hamlet*. For example, the third part will not be a funeral march (Berlioz has made one on this subject), but a piece of music, (in very moderate tempo) into which I shall try to put utmost sorrow, deriving it nominally from the Invocation of Death and the heinous imprecations of the first part.

Was "Hamlet" performed at Angers in 1890? Probably letters of Lekeu not yet published would answer that question. Those edited by Stoecklin (with elisions) do not. Yet one feels inclined to deduce an affirmative answer from the tenor of Lekeu's letter to Kéfer on April 15, 1891, the one informing his friend of the depressed state of mind in which the death of his "cher maître" Franck had left him:

"At Angers [the letter was written in Paris, apparently after a return from Angers] I have heard a good rehearsal of a little orchestral piece which I composed last summer (the second part of an *Etude symphonique* in three parts) [obviously the "Faust" movement] and as it did not sound disagreeable, I took a little courage. . . I shall revise completely, I might say, re-compose the first part of this my second symphonic study, for when I set about to write the third part, the first impressed me as being more *nulle* than the collected works of Ambroise Thomas.

That he did not carry out this plan, is a further deduction from his letter to Kéfer. At any rate it would offer a plausible explanation of the fact that the "Hamlet" (and also the third) movement remained unpublished, whereas the score of the second, the *Faust* movement, seems to have been printed, though, in keeping with that regrettable practice of French and Italian publishers, *en location* only.

"Horrors without name, which I have grouped under the title of a Trio for piano, violin and violoncello." With these not very flattering remarks Lekeu in his letter to Kéfer of April 15, 1891, would seem to refer to the least known (and least coherent) of his chamber music works, finished early in 1891 after he had recovered from the blow dealt him by Franck's death, but commenced early in 1890, and apparently, after the completion of the first movement, laid aside in favor of his *grosse machine* in three parts. I say on purpose "would seem to refer" because the letters quoted below in which other references to the *Trio* occur contain a contradiction. In one of them he mentions a trio for piano, violin and *alto* (underscoring the word *alto*) which leads us almost to suspect that Lekeu at that time was actually working on two different trios, one for the customary combination of piano, violin and violoncello, the other for the rather unusual combination just mentioned! The earliest allusion to a trio I find in Lekeu's letter to Kéfer from Paris, February 1, 1890:

I just left my admired master, Franck, who for half an hour bombarded me with compliments on the first four pages (all I have written in a month) of a Trio for piano, violin and violoncello.—But enough of this.

On April 26, 1890, Lekeu then informs Kéfer that César Franck is

quite satisfied with what I have shown him of the Trio on which I am busy. He warmly encouraged me to persevere in this heavy and irksome task. Hence, I have thrown myself into it with refreshed strength.

It is in his letter to Kéfer of May 22, 1890, that the *alto* is mentioned instead of the violoncello. In these words:

I work much. I do not mean counterpoint; one has to submit to these annoying but indispensable scholasticisms! I have finished the first movement of a Trio for piano, violin and *alto*. The adagio will have been written (at least I hope so) in one or two months. I showed the work to father Franck, who is very much satisfied with it. In fact, I expect to dedicate it to him (which is but natural.)

Between these letters falls one written from Heusy on March 1, 1890, to his mother, which affords a further valuable clue to Lekeu's type of mind as a composer. (After all, he *was* a "programmatic" composer and not a formalist). The letter runs:

The last piece of my Trio is definitely attacked: two pages are written. The rest simmers feverishly in my head. Here is what I should like to express in this first movement. I have all the themes:

1°. *Introduction*: Grief, a ray of hope, fugitive, too short, brusquely driven off by the sombre reverie which, alone, expands and prevails.

2°. *Allegro molto*: The sorrow of melancholy; always to be in battle with matter and with the memories of victory over matter! temporary and torturing. Grief reappears; cries of hate resound and the malediction has plain sailing. The violin issues an appeal of despair: who will deliver me of this torture? The hellish ritornelle answers; the violoncelle [sic!] unites with the violin to proclaim anew the supplication; once more the ritornelle replies. A contest ensues, desperate, between the two ideas (Here it is where I have stopped). The plan of the rest is as follows:

The contest seems to come to an end. Is it to be the end of the suffering?

The melody of Hope of the Introduction reappears. But brusquely Grief, as if irritated by this consoling calm, takes possession of her empire. The cries of hate become more numerous, the fugue in its winding course sweeps them away. Melancholy, too, in an attempt to rend the clouds, is driven off; expelled also all hope; and in impotent lassitude the first section ends as if proclaiming in darkest silence the triumph of Evil.

But, dear Mother, rest assured that the other sections correct the first and the finale will be the luminous development of *Goodness* if I am at all able to cope with that task worthily.

I am satisfied with what I have done so far. With patient travail I hope to reach the end of this work, which I feel to be so beautiful, above all so expressive, and I compel myself to put my whole being into it. Let us hope that you may hear it within a year.

On April 15, 1891, Lekeu had occasion to thank Kéfer for his willingness to lend the string section of his orchestra for the performance of a little piece composed for the approaching marriage of his friend, A. Guignard. It was his unpublished *Epithalame*: "This ensemble of strings, trombone and organ ought not, I think, sound full of holes." April, 1891, is also the date affixed to the printed score of his "Sonate pour piano," yet I can find no mention of this work in the letters published by de Stoecklin. Unfortunately so, for it might have helped to check up Marcel Orban's statement:

A *Suite* for piano was published after his death under the title of Sonata. He did not consider it more than a study in composition; but it is a study of real beauty. The fugue remains a monumental example of the genre.

That Lekeu in letters not yet published speaks of this sonata is clear, since Orban quotes a line from one of these (without further data) to the effect that: "This passage I should not to-day write again, but the fugue is *bien*."

In the absence of documentary evidence, I hesitate to accept Orban's story. The reverse process would have been more plausible: to change the title of sonata to that of suite, as the following little exposé will illustrate.

Lekeu prefixed these verses of George Vanor to the work as a motto (serviceable for a suite as much as for a sonata):

“Comme une mère veille auprès de son enfant
Elle a bercé de ses chansons ma mâle fièvre.
La bonne fée, elle a ranimé de sa lèvre
Ma lèvre, et rafraîchi pour moi, l'air étouffant.”

The music is in keeping with these verses, although it is music with a motto rather than “programmatic” music in the routine sense. The “mâle fièvre” and the “air étouffant” predominate, but since one has to live up to one's motto the “bonne fée” ultimately comes into her own. It is music as from another world, undisturbed by market noise or by witty fashionable gossip. Immature and youthfully crude in spots, to be sure, but like MacDowell's first suite, an astonishing example of adolescent genius. It is unlike MacDowell's suite, however, in its almost ascetic avoidance of brilliant hues, albeit full of color otherwise. The sonata inherited its gait from Bach, its mysticism from Franck and its profile (as seen through a veil) from Wagner.

Academicians among critics will deny to the work its title of sonata. Not without cause, for at best Lekeu wrote a sonata in the original sense of a piece to be played on an instrument and certainly not a sonata in the modern sense of the term: the first and last of the five movements excepted—practically a prelude and an epilogue—the composer revels in a series of strictly contrapuntal fugal movements with just a trace of the so-called sonata-form! Combine this fact with the *fin de siècle* harmonic boldness of the work, its somewhat morbid program, and an impression is produced as if Sweelinck or some other forerunner of Bach had returned to earth, had listened to our modern ways of making music, and had retired to some organ-loft to improvise an organ phantasy in the “modern” style. Not without clinging to the idea of *thematic unity* (so characteristic of archaic suites and sonatas), for Lekeu in this “study in composition,” too, as in his other chamber-music and in the footsteps of his master, César Franck, dedicated himself wholeheartedly to a revival of that maxim of composition.

The nobly harmonized prelude gives the mood of the entire sonata: climaxes interrupted by mystic echoes from the beyond, produced by the simple device of a change in pedals, and at the

end a simple motif obviously announcing the chanson of the good fairy. With slight alterations the main theme of the prelude reappears immediately after the prelude as a fugue theme. A *bona fide* four-part fugue seems to follow, but the movement impresses me more like a fugato variation of the prelude, the prelude theme, the chanson motif, with the mystic harmonic interruptions and syncopations playing the same rôle here as there. In working all this out as if in a choral phantasy for organ, the chanson motif is used partly in canonic imitation for the preparation of a mighty climax, after which the main theme reënters majestically with a kind of basso ostinato leading to the end in almost literal repetition of the closing bars of the prelude. To the student of composition this movement is particularly interesting, for the apparent experiment to utilize fugato as a technical contrivance in adhering *sub rosa* to the sonata-form. The third movement with the chanson motif again as ethereal thematic adjunct, is also a fugato movement in which the first theme seems to have germinated from the basso ostinato of the second movement. The fourth movement in very much slower tempo shows the same contrapuntal style and the same thematic material, though it is varied to fit the story of the movement: a feverish starting up as if haunted by tender calls, a sinking back into despair after a tremendous struggle and yet now with rays of hope breaking through darkness. Obviously the composer is preparing us for the poetic essence of his motto and indeed from the last movement, the epilogue, the "suffocating atmosphere" has been dispelled. The thematic material is the same as in the fourth movement, but the underlying mood is more joyful, and, though passionate, calm with the calmness of the soul after a conflagration. Unfortunately the idea of this epilogue is better than the music, which is somewhat banal.

Whatever one chooses to call Lekeu's "Sonate pour piano"—a sonata, a suite, a theme with variations, an organ fever-phantasy transcribed for the pianoforte—it is on the whole a noble work of youthful genius reaching with outstretched arms for ideals peculiarly his own. But like so much of Schumann's music, it seems to have been sung to the composer's own soul or to a few intimates and not to a listening crowd. With all its thundering climaxes the sonata is music for the chamber, not for the concert-hall, and it is perhaps impressive rather than effective. For that reason all but a few independent concert-pianists will naturally hesitate to introduce Lekeu's sonata to our audiences, so accustomed to the sterility of "effective" pianists' programs.

Middle of June, 1891, Lekeu informed his friend Kéfer that he had accepted Vincent d'Indy's advice to embark on the adventure of trying to capture the Belgian *prix de Rome*:

I obey him and so also satisfy my parents, who at present dream of nothing but to see one of these days this supreme and governmental prize allotted to me.

However, I must confess candidly how disagreeable it would be not to be admitted to the final test and yet from a strictly materialistic standpoint (I mean the time for jotting down the notes) I dread the preliminary more than the final competition. For the latter they accord us 27 days *en loge*, whereas for the preliminary test we have but 72 hours—3 days for the composition of the four-part fugue and the complete score of the chorus with orchestra.

I have never been able to make a fugue in less than six days and, as regards the chorus with orchestra, when I tried to compose one in as short a time as possible, it took me 8 days. . . . However, if I can finish these two affairs in three days and the jury then pronounces them too bad for my admission to the final competition, I shall be vexed indeed. . . .

This letter was followed by one *en loge* to his mother in the first flush of victory half an hour after Gevaert on July 25, 1891 had pronounced him "premier admissible" for the final test. As Lekeu was the youngest competitor, it had fallen to his lot to draw a fugue theme from the urn. The theme drawn was of the poorest, and so unfit for vocal treatment that Gevaert immediately charged the competitors to use it for organ and string quartet accompaniment. Lekeu felt satisfied with his "sane, sonorous" chorus and attributed his preliminary victory to his careful instrumentation ("one is not a pupil of d'Indy just for nothing"). His fugue horrified him as "raw as iron and void of all musical interest." He did not hesitate to say so afterwards to Emile Matthieu of the jury, who replied with Gallic esprit: "Well, Monsieur Lekeu, you see that our opinion was quite different from yours." The letter continued:

I might now perhaps by sawing wood like a deaf man unhook a second honorable mention, but I hope that my two old friends [his parents] will not get a swollen head and figure out that the *premier admissible* thereby becomes first in the real competition. To write and finish such a complicated cantata as demanded here one needs an experience and a flow of ideas which one cannot have at 21 years. Perhaps in two years I could win the second prize and in four the first. However, that is a beautiful dream and nothing else.

In his letter to Kéfer of July 30 he voiced similar sentiments:

You appear to think that I shall split the drum with the first blow. At 21 one does not triumph so easily, particularly not in

competition with chaps of 26, 28, and 29 years, of whom one, M. Paul Lebrun, harmony professor at the conservatory of Gand, already twice has carried off the first second prize. . . The prize will go to him who is the first to complete the sketch of his cantata and who has more time than the others to instrumentate with care. This rapidity of workmanship I am far from possessing. Shall I ever have it? . . . To be perfectly frank, I attach little importance to that bizarre faculty of completing a work of art in quick-step and I consider it rather strange that precisely that faculty is asked of the future musician.

All this in order to tell you that perhaps by sawing wood conscientiously I may gather in the Rome prize in four years. Here I play the rôle of an *amateur* rather than of a competitor and though I am not lying exactly on a bed of roses, my life is not altogether disagreeable. Our subject is *Andromède* [the text was by Jules Sauvenière] and is burdened with three situations:

1. Ethiopia is devastated by a monster: religious scene for the purpose of asking Ammon if a sacrifice can free the country. The god answers that it is necessary to sacrifice the princess Andromeda by chaining her to a rock. Object: to reduce the affront to the Nereides whom Andromeda conquered in a beauty contest. The people seize the virgin without listening to her supplications.

2. Andromeda alone, her grief; the Nereides playing on the waves, taunt her without pity.

3. Perseus (who without doubt, was promenading in those parts) frees Andromeda; they marry, the people (who have turned their coat . . . why?) yell to Hymen. . . Hopes that they will have lots of children. Harps, etc. . .

My work progresses without foolish haste or exasperating slowness. To-morrow I shall have finished the first scene (the longest of the three by far). It comprises a good old religious march. Scene of invocation, the Devil incarnate and his entourage.

I see clearly that in 21 days, when I shall leave here, I shall be completely wiped out physically. Also, I have abandoned entirely my original intention of forcing a hearing of my cantata on the jury at the piano, with chorus and soloists. . .

To Kéfer, August 10, 1891.

. . . my cantata is completely composed and even the orchestration is well advanced: the seventy-fifth page of score begins to look black. To-morrow at noon without doubt, I shall be through with the first half of the text. The second, I hope, will progress with the same rapidity.

In other words, my cantata will be finished on time between now and August twentieth unless I fall sick. But that is impossible, because I have felt marvelously well since my entry *en loge*. Of the result of this contest I have not the slightest idea. Yet I can promise you that the orchestration will be good from the first to the last note. I have worked a lot during the last year and a half; I had the good luck of hearing music of mine at Angers and I begin to feel a sure hand in the polyphonic treatment of the orchestra.

Having finished the composition of the cantata in advance of the date I had fixed for myself, I shall be able to devote more time to the instrumentation. . .

Is it good? Or is it not? Who knows? It is done and settled: *voilà* the main point, finish the job at whatever cost. Such a cantata never is good from beginning to end; even the best show numerous defects. Now one lacks the time to retouch these dark spots and for that reason this competition business is diametrically opposed to artistic work, sincere and comforting. On certain days (yesterday for example) I feel satisfied with my work. Everything looks solidly constructed; of a good, expressive musical cohesion of parts, the whole ensemble dramatic and above all sincere. In brief, I am satisfied with myself. On other days (this afternoon for example) everything looks like a failure and then I pass hours not exactly gay. This evening my spirits are higher again. I heard fragments of cantatas of two of my competitors. Verily, without wishing to be conceited, I may affirm that my own work is better than what they played to me; for truly and without doubt their productions are but vast exercises. . . powdered over with Wagnerian reminiscences; not one cry of expression, not one gripping chord, nothing of those things that come from and go to the heart.

Of such things, possibly only one or two occur in my own cantata, but at least I have the certain consolation to have felt and written in spots something sane, honest and human. But this certainty perhaps (indeed probably) will be but a doubt in the minds of the jury and I have not much hope of getting anything out of this business. Possibly the extreme care bestowed on the orchestration will gain me a second honorable mention. But I better not count on that. . .

But when this clairvoyant auto-prophecy actually came true, did Lekeu break forth into a *chant de triomphale délivrance*? Far from it! He proved that after all he could be a "serious young gentleman" not only but also at times a foolish young gentleman like the rest of us. The contrast in tone between the last letter quoted and the following to Kéfer, end of August, is really amusing:

Since Sunday I have passed horrible days, and still more horrible nights. And this because of a foolish, senseless, wild and perhaps unpardonable step.

But you know me and you can see me when I heard the name of S . . . come before mine. A foolish rage seized me, my teeth chattered and (so I was told afterwards) I had the expression of a maniac. Without realizing what I was doing, I refused to enter the jury's room. The next day I was still so much in the grip of this atrocious impression that I wrote a note of protest to the *Indépendance Belge* which had published the verdict without mentioning my refusal.

He then felt utterly crushed by his acts of "childish folly," but by middle of September, it appears from a letter to Vincent d'Indy, he had calmed himself sufficiently to reach the conclusion that, everything considered, he had acted wisely! Commenting on the fact that Oscar Roëls' cantata, "a very interesting composition, of exquisite charm and of absolutely extraordinary

formal perfection," was thrown out of court, he leaves no doubt that his dream of winning the coveted Rome prize in four years had completely vanished and that he had thrown behind him any design of further competition:

The Rome competition is not at all what I believed it to be and I do not even feel justified in feeling proud of my victory in the preliminary contest. With one exception I had to do only with old conservatory pillars, who do not know even the most elementary part of their craft and have absolutely no ideas in their heads. However, the contest was not between them personally, but between the *Belgian conservatories*.

I have seen the six works submitted to the jury. Four of them do not *exist* by reason of absence of every emotion and because of poverty of harmonic invention. As for polyphony, a dead letter for these people; they hardly know it by name. . .

As for myself, I had the rare good chance of being moved by my subject and of having felt during the 25 days *en loge* better disposed for work than ever. I have composed the first work with which I really have felt satisfied. Most certainly I shall have to concede numerous weak spots, but I may say to you as to my best and most sincere friend, that I have written pages of music worthy of a pupil of Franck and in which an impartial musician must recognize immediately that I have listened to your counsel with attention.

I had not a single vote for the first prize. Without hesitation the jury disregarded me and M. Lebrun of Gand received the prize with four against three votes for M. Smalders of Liège, who received five votes against two for the second prize.

Roëls received nothing; he was put out of court without ceremony. And without doubt the same fate would have been in store for me, had I not studied your scores (the *Scène Cévenole* and *Wallenstein*); but the jury apparently feared that I might get my work performed and therefore offered me the second-second prize.

The cause of my and Roël's downfall is the same old jealousy of musical academies of modern music; but for me the case became more complicated on account of the fact that my whole education was received at Paris and outside of any conservatory.

Parts of Lekeu's luckless "*Andromède*" were performed a few months after his refusal of the second-second prize at a "Concert des XX" at Brussels; the whole work then on March 27, 1892, at the conservatory of Verviers under the ever loyal Louis Kéfer. The reception accorded was indeed different from that by the prize jury and this difference—it goes without saying—is strikingly reflected by the following letters written to his father.

February 27, 1892.

I must tell you about the concert of the XX at which a part of my *Andromède* was played. To put it briefly, it had a big success. In the first place, the performance was ideal. All the instrumentalists

had become passionately fond of this music and reproduced it down to my very last intentions. After the last note, the applause exploded in the whole large hall. Mlle. de Haene stepped forward to bow to the public, but when she left the stage, the applause continued to increase; all the musicians tapped on their instruments and from every part of the hall came shouts "composer, composer." I had to show myself and the tapping became louder. When I sought to retire, the musicians would not let me and I had to bow my acknowledgements again to the public. And when at last I could reach the foyer, while Crickboom, Gillet, etc., were surrounding and hugging me, I still heard the audience applaud. To be perfectly candid, that number on the program interested the public most; I am immensely pleased with the reception, since I was just a little nervous about a public so different from that at Verviers.

But what filled me with more joy than anything else, beside d'Indy's praise, was Ysaye's conduct toward me. At the end of the concert he mounted the platform and took me, figuratively speaking, into his arms by saying aloud that my *Andromède* was the work of an *artist* and of a *great musician* and that he had never before listened to a work by so young a man *wise* and *impassioned* at the same time. . . . An hour later I was at the Conservatory. . . . Ysaye when introducing me to his pupils began by bombarding me with compliments, for instance: "Here is a pupil of Father Franck; alone of composers of to-day, he composes music which is not an imitation of Wagner—whom he knows by heart."

Then he asked me if I had composed chamber-music. When I answered in the negative, he asked me to let him have all the chamber-music which I might write in the future. He assured me of a performance on every suitable occasion and more particularly he asked me to start off with a Sonata for violin and pianoforte. Well, I call that a soft snap, to hear one's self played by Ysaye! . . .

To-day at 11 o'clock (from 11 to 2) the first general rehearsal. Last Thursday evening I had heard the orchestra rehearsal with chorus and soloists. I had been quite satisfied from beginning to end; without any weak spots it sounded excellent, but to-day still better. The horribly difficult choruses go as if sewed together, the attacks are firm and all nuances duly carried out.

They sound splendidly; in the first part as if smitten with affliction, lugubrious, then tragic and wild; in the second part they overflow with life, with abandon, triumphant sonority; one really feels that the world has been saved for ever; "that radiates" as Kéfer said.

The orchestra, on the other hand, marches like one man, disclosing the most secret sentiments of Andromeda, of Perseus, and the crowd surrounding them. Above all, it sounds intense. Throughout one feels the influence of the old man César Franck more than that of Wagner; hardly at all, or not at all that of d'Indy: his orchestra has an entirely different sound.

I am happy beyond words because I appear to be able to adore the word of my master and most loyal friend without imitating him in the slightest. Perhaps one day I shall be able to do as well as he, though in a totally different *genre* of sonority.

Without humbug, this work is very much more solid than the *Chant lyrique*. That work still gave me somewhat the impression of a very lucky accident. But *Andromède* is the work of a manipulator of orchestra and chorus very sure of his craft. One feels that I can draw adequate effects from the orchestra whenever I shall wish. I feel myself in possession of a solid brain,—I know my business. Now back to work!

In 1904 *Andromède* was again performed at Brussels, conducted by Huberti, a member of the *prix de Rome* jury. According to Marcel Orban, the public gave it a demonstrative reception, thus flaying the stupidity or partiality of the jury in 1891. This may be true, but if Orban sees in Lekeu's *Andromède* "melodic invention of incredible richness, the whole work astonishing in mastery of craft and expression," I feel inclined to argue that the success was not wholly due to esthetic but partly to the political reasons advanced by Orban and that he greatly exaggerates the merits of the work. Of course, I have not heard it in its orchestral garb on which Lekeu bestowed such care, and I realize that it is easy to do an injustice to modern works seen through the medium of a vocal score only, but even a vocal score will show "incredible richness of melodic invention, etc."—provided it really is to be found. Exactly that I am inclined to deny. *Andromède* is in Lekeu's typical manner, but notwithstanding this transparent individuality, the cantata lacks a convincing character. Mainly because the two principals, Andromeda and Perseus, do not stand out in proper musical relief, though Andromeda's lament is impressive enough. On the whole, they betray that lifeless stiffness and strained vitality in their utterances which one would be surprised not to find in *prix de Rome* cantatas or in similar prize-bouquets of artificial flowers. The first part of the Cantata is decidedly better than the second. It is logical, organic, full of vigor and color; in short it illustrates again the curious fact that composers often bestow more inspiration and sympathy on monsters, ghosts, goblins than on their victims. Had the second part maintained the level of the first, *Andromède* might be called an effective work in spite of Andromeda, but unfortunately it is incoherent, bombastic and runs from bad to worse, ending with a rather empty and insipid outburst of joy. This weakness of the second part in my opinion will defeat further attempts to win a permanent place for Lekeu's cantata in the concert-hall. With all its undeniable merits Lekeu's *Andromède* is not a great work of art, though, of course, very much better than many a choral work which conductors persist in inflicting upon the dear public's ears.

There is in these letters but the one brief allusion to the *Fantasie symphonique sur deux airs populaires angevins* quoted below under date of November 2, 1892. Yet, with the violin sonata and the unfinished quartet it forms the trio of Lekeu's works that has carried his name and fame farthest. The last page of the original score reproduced in facsimile, in Octave Séré's book shows the dates "Mai, 1891, 28 Mai, 1892." In other words Lekeu began work on this phantasy before his painful experience *en loge* and did not finish it until shortly before the violin sonata occupied his mind. The first performance of the work with orchestra appears to have been delayed until October 21, 1893, at Verviers under Lekeu's own direction. After that Vincent d'Indy, Chevillard, Colonne and other French and Belgian conductors stood sponsors for the work, until, so we are told by several French authors, it has become fairly fixed in the French and Belgian repertoires. One handicap to a more rapid circulation must be seen in the tardy publication of the full score—not until 1909. In America the *Fantasie* appears not to have attracted the attention it deserves. Properly placed on a program, the score cannot fail to release that spontaneous applause with which it has been greeted elsewhere. Nor is that hard to explain. As Lekeu justly remarked after the Verviers performance in a letter quoted by Orban, "the orchestra purls with enthusiasm and sonority. There are in the piece certain trombones fairly *Jerichotiens*." Furthermore, by virtue of the fact that he based the fantasie on two captivating folk-songs of Anjou (the first of an infecting jollity) the work is bathed in sunshine far more than any of his other works. Unfortunately Lekeu's programmatic note prefaced to Samazeuilh's not very happy arrangement of the score for four hands has been omitted from the published full score. This omission places conductor and audience at a decided disadvantage, since it robs them of the key to the structure of the work. Until I discovered that discrepancy between full score and arrangement, I was puzzled by the hesitation of a very distinguished American conductor (who estimates Lekeu's talent at its true value and considers Lekeu's *Adagio pour quatuor d'orchestre* on Georges Vanor's line "Les fleurs pales du souvenir" very beautiful—and it *is* a gem as Vincent d'Indy first proved to Parisians), to perform the *Fantaisie* on the ground that "it is good in spots, but is very detached and to my mind ill-formed."

I cannot but question the soundness of this stricture if the score be examined and tested in public with the indispensable aid of Lekeu's programmatic key:

Note de l'auteur.

A la tombée du soir, les couples enlacés bondissent et tourbillonnent; c'est le bal de l'"Assemblée" et la danse toujours s'accélère aux crix joyeux des gars, aux rires éperdus des filles rouges de plaisir, pendant qu'éclat, dominant la fête et sa folie, la voix souveraine de l'Eternel Amour. . .

Vers la pleine, où l'ombre s'approfondit, paisible et mystérieuse, l'Amant a entraîné l'Amante. . .

Il résiste à la voix aimée qui lui demande de retourner à la danse, et, riieuse, par les champs silencieux, va répétant les rondes toujours plus lointaines; il sait implorer et dire sa tendresse.

Dans le décor d'une nuit d'été lumineuse, étoilée et plaine du parfum de la terre endormie, la scène amoureuse déroule sa passion grandissante, et les amants s'éloignent au frais murmure de la rivière qu'argente le clair de lune.

For one thing we should feel thankful to the jury of 1891: their verdict aroused a storm of protest among Lekeu's friends of whom Eugene Ysaye was the greatest and so indirectly gave birth to Lekeu's violin sonata, "a master work which for breadth of ideas and melodic inspiration need not fear a comparison with *père Franck's* violin sonata." Praise higher than this is impossible. Whether or not he indorses fully these words of Destranges in his "Consonances et dissonances" (1906), every unbiased critic will have to admit that of violin sonatas composed since Brahms and Franck, Lekeu's is inferior to none. Since Eugene Ysaye, to whom, of course, it is dedicated, launched the work, it has steered a triumphal course throughout the musical world and is to-day, or ought to be, in the repertoire of every violinist capable of playing and understanding it and not addicted to atrophy of taste and ambition.

Commissioned, we have seen, by Ysaye in February, 1892, the Violin sonata was not finished until some time in the fall of 1892, as appears from the context of the following two letters, the first written by Lekeu to his mother, the second to his father:

[Fall 1892.]

. . . I shall see Kéfer at Verviers and I shall acquaint him with my Sonata for piano and violin which I (in parenthesis) finished copying to-day. I merely have to extract the violin part and shall then definitely be rid of that big job. I now commence to bother my head with new things: simultaneously germs of themes for *Paysages d'Ardenne* [where he had been with Kéfer] and the *Conquête du bonheur*. . . and bits of verse, rhymed or not, for this last mentioned work. Let us hope that something good will come of all this. Fortunately I have advanced since July last, for I already see how I could have improved upon what I did in my Sonata (this is a sure and mathematic means for observing progress in one's ideas: to feel the weakness of what one has done and

to reason it out). This does not mean that I shall rewrite this or that passage is my sonata; no, the true way of correcting a work is to write one better. . .

To his father, Heusy, November 2, 1892.

At Brussels yesterday morning I was put into a cheerful condition by the exhibition of enthusiasm and friendship which Ysaye, etc., have shown me.

If I arrive at composing the Quartet which Ysaye demands of me, Maus is fully inclined to give at Brussels (at the XX) what he calls (be it understood!) a *Séance Lekeu* ! ! ! ! ! at which one shall hear the Sonata for violin and piano, the Quartet and my three songs impatiently awaited by two or three singers of Brussels.

Perhaps even my *Fantasy on two Angevins airs* will receive a hearing in the transcription for piano 4 hands which Monday morning at Sèthe's excited unbelievable transports of enthusiasm.

Saturday evening, Ysaye played my Sonata at his home. According to all present (pupils and friends who hear him constantly) Ysaye surpassed himself.

In Crickboom's opinion, it is this sonata which Ysaye interprets with a maximum of style, either of passionate abandon or of absolute calm, as is, for example, so necessary in the second movement. . .

Lekeu's violin sonata (in G minor) was first played in public by Eugen Ysaye to whom it is dedicated, but the exact date is unknown to me. At Paris it was brought out by Paul Viardot and Bertha Demanton in 1899; at Boston in 1902 by Karel Ondricek and Alice Cummings. Essentially different from the pianoforte-sonata, the violin-sonata, too, cannot deny its descent (for instance melodically) from César Franck. Though much maturer than the pianoforte sonata, it does not lack the flavor of a study in composition, since certain experiments in thematic development and form seem to have occupied Lekeu's mind when composing the sonata. Instead of dissecting, doubling, telescoping, breaking up his themes and juggling with their component parts—a procedure so unendurable in the imitators of Beethoven and Brahms—Lekeu preferred to leave his themes more or less intact and sought to make the thematic narrative more convincing by repetition of important phrases at different pitches. We know this procedure of sequence from Liszt's symphonic poems. Those who criticize Liszt for following it will also condemn Lekeu. Yet the principle of sequence as a lever for development of motive power is perfectly sound in itself. The artistic test lies merely in its application. If Liszt, the pioneer, applied the principle of sequential leverage still somewhat crudely and primitively, that does not necessarily bar later composers from succeeding where he at times failed. If then Lekeu in his violin sonata, as

also in his unfinished quartet, is seen after a few bars to have no intention to indulge in the traditional thematic contortion and anatomical dissection, he has a divine right as an artist to choose his own method of expression. If we are anxious for critical battle, the only fair thing to do is to follow the artist, meet him on his own ground and challenge the solution of his self-imposed problem. Hence, it is one thing to criticise Lekeu for having adopted in his violin sonata the principle of sequence at all, quite another to insist—and correctly so—that he failed to solve his problem completely, since there still adheres to the result an element of experiment: unfortunately Lekeu's thematic blocks are not so skilfully cemented as always to hide the crevices, which is the main danger a composer faces in that process. However, between this admission and the verdict of incoherence occasionally rendered against Lekeu's sonata there lies a wide gulf. Moreover the charge of incoherence will be put across the path of every artist who dares to break with formal traditions and need not be taken seriously.

While the Lekeu "sigh" or "wail," is not wholly absent from the sonata, it bubbles over with the freshness and joyousness of youth, though of youth meditative, not flippant. In the second of the three movements, by way of contrast, sadder chords are touched and also by way of contrast to the second movement, which the composer wished played with utmost calm, the two outer movements revel in bold, biting dissonances. No poetic program or motto prefaces the score. This fact at least permits the inference that the composer had no underlying poetic idea in mind when he composed his violin sonata as a modern of moderns and not as a student of archaic forms, as in the pianoforte sonata. Furthermore, the themes of the violin sonata show a remarkable lung capacity. They possess a breadth which is just as characteristic of Lekeu as are for instance choppy themes of the later violin sonatas of Emil Sjögren. On the other hand, Lekeu's themes in this sonata cannot be claimed to be very original; but what they lack in this respect is atoned for by their clear, bold curve, their intensity, their driving power and their inherent fitness for application of the ideas of thematic unity. The dullest ear cannot fail to notice that the opening theme of the sonata dominates the whole work. Indeed, even the secondary themes of the first movement seem to render homage to the main theme and we notice how a phrase of merely incidental appearance, that helps to build the bridge for the second theme, assumes vital importance in the third movement. In this last movement Lekeu either

blends with surpassing contrapuntal skill the several themes of the sonata or he increases the rhythmical interest by their bold juxtaposition. To these devices Lekeu obviously owes the irresistible swing and the necessary accumulation of expansive force for the almost spectacular end of the last movement. In my opinion, however, its artistic beauty is somewhat marred by the amalgamation into one theme of a distinctly Russian danse motif and an upstarting chromatic phrase somewhat in the style of the later Wagner or Richard Strauss. The second movement is a revery. It opens in the unusual $\frac{7}{8}$ rhythm, is written in the simple A B A form with section B in the "character of a folk-song" and gains additional charm by having reminiscences of the first movement dreamily interwoven in its texture.

The *Quatour inachevé* for piano and strings was first performed at Brussels, Salle Ravenstein, on October 23, 1894, by the quartet of Crickboom, Angenot, P. Miry, Gillet with the assistance of Miss Louisa Merck at the piano. Inasmuch as its composition was not prompted by *premonition of death*, but was *bestellte Arbeit* by Eugene Ysaye, it goes without saying that it was dedicated to him. Presumably and precisely because this work was commissioned by his great compatriot, Lekeu took such infinite pains with it: in little less than a year he finished but little more than the first movement.

One studies this priceless torso of what probably would have become the longest quartet on record and marvels at Lekeu's wealth of inspiration, his emotional intensity and the ingenuity and madness of his methods. No established pattern seems to fit the first movement; at any rate, the classic quartet form is adhered to only as if in a frame. To be sure, we hear two predominant themes, they change place in the tonal structure and all that sort of thing, but Lekeu does not stop there. At times his bridge-work assumes prime thematic importance or he gives free flight to his fancy in improvising on his main theme before he rushes into the working-out section. Furthermore, we have not one peroration only but several, and all this thematic strife is repeatedly interrupted, as it were, by an armistice. It follows readily that by thus interrupting the climax—and the working-out idea is inherently the embodiment of climaxes—Lekeu obtains a cragged, hence bolder and more effective curve. One begins to suspect that formal considerations alone did not prompt these interruptions. The whole movement is to be played throughout "Dans un emportement douloureux. (Tres animé)." This indication is prefixed to a short introduction full of Lekeu "sighs"

and this introduction reappears in the thematic wood toward the end of the movement. Furthermore, this phrase "lent et passioné"



his hand and the movement comes to a sudden halt with a painful anti-climax. Vincent d'Indy, when he revised and prepared the manuscript for publication, reverently contented himself with bringing this stump of a severed piece of music to a playable end.

No doubt there are those who will decry in Lekeu's quartet the absence of a "true" chamber-music-style, will denounce it as "too orchestral" and so forth, but such pedantic or shallow objections really ought to be muttered below breath if at all, in face of the amazing contrapuntal resourcefulness and display of tone-color with which Lekeu gave life to the ensemble of the individual instruments. That does not mean that the quartet is so perfect as to defy criticism, but I think that legitimate criticism will have to steer clear of such *clichés* as "too orchestral" and will have to content itself with observing, for instance, that Lekeu might better have avoided a too frequent unison of the violoncello with the piano bass and on the other hand a too frequent display of the violoncello in its upper registers.

Lekeu's letter to Mathieu Crickboom record for us the time of practically the last stroke of his pen given by Lekeu to his marvelously beautiful Swan-song. He wrote in August, 1893:

. . . The first movement of my first Quatuor for piano and strings—not an indication that a second one will emerge later on—is finished since July 16, 1893, six P. M. The peroration, in which I have essayed a translation into music of the last eruption of Mount Aetna, is just barely playable.

Nevertheless, it appears very logical to me. I am now ruminating the second movement, which, I feel, will be very superior to the first, while I am recopying conscientiously what I have done since December.

I have become scared, in recopying my infernal Quartet, at the quantity of sharps and flats with which it is bristling. How, if I suppressed them altogether?

And in a letter from Angers, September 20, 1893:

The first half of the second movement of my first Quatuor for piano and strings is *confectionnée*: weight 1463 grains.

We are equally well informed of the inception of the work and its slow progress from letters written the first to Kéfer, the others to his "chère petite maman," with which this essay fittingly may end without further comment:

To Kéfer, Angers, December 31, 1892.

Since I left you I put the last hand to my *Trois poèmes pour chant* (Soprano and piano) and I have begun work on my quartet for piano and strings.

The first movement is started but gives me a dog's pain. I tremble when the idea forces itself upon me that if I wish to adhere strictly to my plan, the second and third movements will be still more difficult to write. I do not believe that I can possibly get through by March and so satisfy Ysaye and Maus. . .

To his mother, February 7, 1893.

My brain is in a turmoil; my work progresses extraordinarily. I have a thousand things to write, I am actually loaded down and I march the streets as one with hallucinations. After a good many days of reflection, of criticism, of despair even, I saw the day before yesterday a long passage of the first part of my quartet sketch itself and since then an incredible fever of work has seized me.

Unfortunately, for there is an unfortunately, I am just as full of distress as of happiness. For the reason that what I am doing is so distant from what has become customary in chamber-music that I fear to appear to my friends and interpreters (for the public, of course, I care not) as one tainted with the most extraordinary madness.

And yet, everything duly considered, I must walk a straight path and write what I feel without paying attention to others. Instead of having, as is the sacred habit, a piece rolling on a single sentiment, mood, color, line, the first part of my quartet is for me the frame of an entire poem of the heart, where a thousand sentiments clash, where cries of suffering yield to long appeals to happiness, where there is strife and insinuation of caresses, seeking to calm sombre thoughts, where cries of love follow blackest despair in the effort to conquer it, and on the other hand eternal grief endeavors to crush the joy of Life. Joys of childhood, visions of dawn and of Spring, the melancholy of fall and tears; and I do not shrink from piercing cries of pain, put into my music with all my might, with my whole soul.

But this expressive chaos must also be harmonious and at the moment when I write the loveliest phrase, I must foresee the development of grief which is to follow. Hence, this is not merely a terribly difficult work to write on account of the transitions of mood, but murderous for any attempt to grasp its total structure.

However, come what may, I labor and want to carry this "work" to a successful end. Already I can affirm that in comparison with what I am now writing, my violin sonata is a mere trifle, worth two sous. And that makes me fear a little the day when Ysaye and his friends will read for the first time my Quartet. But, what's the difference! If they do not understand it, so much the worse for me. Above all I want to write down what passes in me without ulterior thoughts.

February 22, 1893.

. . . You can hear me, from morning to evening, making an infernal noise on my unfortunate Erard, for I strive with all my might to finish at Angers the first movement of the Quartet. Let us hope that it is not a crazy dream. What in this business supports me and at the same time fills me with despair is that I feel clearly how with my plan of moods a true artist could compose a master-work: one of those unforgettable *machines* which send the shivers up and down the spine, which

grip you amidst tremblings of admiration, leaves you breathless, exhausted, ravished, enchanted all in one. . .

I am playing for a big stake. If what I am doing is good, if my interpreters (for I work only for them and myself), if Ysaye, Van Hout, Jacob and my dear Mathieu Crickboom comprehend my work, that will give me courage vertiginous and as soon as possible I shall install myself in the *Paysage d'Ardenne*s or the *Légende éternelle*, or take up any other of a dozen or fifteen projected works (yes, O Lord, not less than that; I drew up a list just for the sake of curiosity) and I can say that I wrote a beautiful work, unless. . . *cré nom de chien*, my profession is after all not a soft snap! However, just at present, I have the courage of a devil and I could apply the admirable verses of Baudelaire to Théodore de Bauville, then at the beginning of his career, to myself. You do not know them, these verses. Read and re-read this magical French:

Vous avez empoigné les crins de la Déesse
Avec un tel poignet, qu'on vous eût pris a voir
Et cet air de maîtrise et ce beau nonchaloir
Pour un ruffian terrassant sa maîtresse.

April 30, 1893.

. . . Last evening I recommenced work on my Quartet, which slumbered for almost three weeks. Good news! So far everything in it appears to me to sound well and full of expression. It is, I believe, of much more solid workmanship than the violin sonata. Verily, if I can carry to a successful end this big, very big job, it ought to become a beautiful work. All my melodies are laid out. To-morrow I shall embark on the peroration section, which will bring about the return of the principal theme, enlarged, stronger, and still more beautiful. For a piece of music should grow while expanding. All this, of course, with regard to the first movement. The second and third will give me less trouble, I hope. . .

More and more clearly I see and feel that I need your presence for my complete happiness. The future absolutely must reunite us and I wish that my life might end as it began, in the cradle of your love.

See how tender I become; it is the best proof that I am well prepared to resume my work. *Allons*, dear, adored mother; courage, perfect health and then tell yourself often, always, that your *Sidoïm* is and always will be he whom you so well know.

That is my pledge for life. To you I owe everything.